

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

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SUBJECT: OPENING OF AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT BRINGS SOME SURPRISES

REF: CANBERRA 4314

1. SUMMARY: FIRST WEEK OF 29TH AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HAS BROUGHT SOME SURPRISES BUT ALSO HARDENING OF ELECTORAL LINES. ONE OF TWO INDEPENDENT SENATORS (STEELE HALL, SOUTH AUSTRALIA) HAS VOTED TWICE WITH LABOR AND WAS JOINED ONCE BY A LIBERAL OR COUNTRY PARTY SENATOR. RESULT IS LABOR ELECTED PRESIDEING OFFICERS IN BOTH HOUSE AND SENATE. HOWEVER, EVEN IF ONE INDEPENDENT SENATOR REGULARLY VOTES WITH LABOR, PARTIES WILL BE EVENLY DIVIDED AND LABOR LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM WILL BE IN DANGER. END SUMMARY

2. OPENING WEEK OF 29TH AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HAS BROUGHT NUMBER OF SURPRISES BUT, ON WHOLE, CONFIRMATION OF TIGHTNESS OF POLITICAL BALANCE. FOLLOWING PRESENTATION OF SPEECH BY OUTGOING GOVERNOR-GENERAL, SIR PAUL HASLUCK, ON JULY 9 (REFTEL) HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, AS EXPECTED, RE-ELECTED
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J.F. COPE (ALP, NEW SOUTH WALES) SPEAKER BY VOTE OF

63 TO 57 (NUMBER OF MEMBERS STILL OUT WITH FLU). IN SIMULTANEOUS ACTION IN SENATE, MEMBERS ELECTED SENATOR JUSTIN O'BYRNE (ALP, TASMANIA) PRESIDENT OF SENATE IN SECRET BALLOT BY VOTE OF 31 TO 29.

3. ELECTION OF COPE AS SPEAKER OF HOUSE WAS VIRTUALLY INEVITABLE AND CAUSED NO SURPRISE. HOWEVER, IT BECAME CLEAR THAT IN SENATE, FROM SUBSEQUENT STATEMENTS MADE BY INDEPENDENT SENATORS, SENATOR STEELE HALL (FORMER PREMIER OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA) HAD VOTED FOR SENATOR O'BYRNE. HOWEVER, AS SENATOR TOWNLEY (INDEPENDENT, TASMANIA) STATED HE HAD VOTED WITH LIBERAL-COUNTRY SENATORS, IT IS OBVIOUS THAT A LIBERAL OR COUNTRY SENATOR VOTED WITH LABOR TO ELECT O'BYRNE AS PRESIDENT. AT THIS POINT INTENSIVE SPECULATION BEGAN AS TO THE IDENTITY OF THE LIBERAL OR COUNTRY PARTY SENATOR, SO FAR WITHOUT DEFINITE RESULT.

4. JULY 10 LIBERAL SENATE LEADER, SENATOR WITHERS, INTRODUCED AMENDMENT TO MOTION WELCOMING SPEECH BY GOVERNOR-GENERAL (SPEECH, OF COURSE, WAS WRITTEN BY LABOR GOVERNMENT AND REPRESENTS ITS POLICY), SHARPLY CRITICIZING GOVERNMENT FOR ITS HANDLING OF ECONOMIC PROBLEMS (INFLATION, UNEMPLOYMENT, CREDIT SQUEEZE) AND FOR "ITS CONTINUOUS CONFRONTATION WITH THE STATE GOVERNMENTS AND THE UNDERMINING OF THEIR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES." FOLLOWING DEBATE WHICH EXTENDED INTO JULY 11, AMENDMENT WAS DEFEATED BY TIE VOTE OF 30 TO 30. (UNDER SECTION 23 OF AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION TIED VOTE ON MEASURE IS DEFINED AS DEFEAT OF MEASURE.)

5. VOTE ON AMENDMENT TO MOTION WAS PUBLIC, WITH SENATOR STEELE HALL VOTING WITH ALP FOR SECOND TIME IN TWO DAYS. IN DEBATE PRECEDING VOTE HALL, IN HIS MAIDEN SPEECH IN SENATE, ACCUSED OPPOSITION LEADERS OF LACKING DIRECTION, CONSTRUCTIVE POLICIES, AND A COHERENT IDEOLOGY. HE DENOUNCED OPPOSITION FOR FORCING MAY ELECTIONS AND SAID HE WAS DISAPPOINTED TO DISCOVER THAT LIBERAL AND COUNTRY PARTIES HAD NO MORE IDEA ABOUT THEIR FUTURE ACTIONS THAN THE LABOR GOVERNMENT.

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6. ROUNDING OUT DEVELOPMENTS IN FIRST WEEK OF PARLIAMENT WAS SWEARING IN ON JULY 11 OF NEW GOVERNOR-GENERAL, SIR JOHN KERR, FORMER CHIEF JUSTICE OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

7. COMMENT: TOO MUCH SHOULD NOT BE MADE OF THE ABOVE DEVELOPMENTS, AS THE SESSION HAS JUST BEGUN. HOWEVER,

SENATOR STEELE HALL HAS ONCE AGAIN UNDERLINED HIS ESSENTIALLY MAVERICK CHARACTER, WHICH ULTIMATELY MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR HIM TO REMAIN STATE LIBERAL LEADER IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA. IN A CONVERSATION WITH AN EMBOFF IN ADELAIDE IN EARLY MAY, BEFORE ELECTIONS, SENATOR HALL SAID HIS FIRST PRIORITY WOULD BE TO RE-ESTABLISH VIABLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE NATIONAL LIBERAL LEADERSHIP. HE HAS CHOSEN AN ODD WAY TO DO THIS. UNLESS HIS VOTING PATTERN BEGINS TO REFLECT A DIFFERENCE FROM THAT NOW ESTABLISHED, THE TRUE BALANCE IN THE SENATE WILL BE APPROXIMATELY 30 TO 30, AND HALL WILL BE COUNTED AS MUCH A DEPENDABLE LABOR VOTER AS INDEPENDENT SENATOR TURNBULL (TASMANIA) WAS CONSIDERED IN THE OUTGOING SENATE.

8. HOWEVER, EVEN IF HALL VOTES MORE OR LESS CONSISTENTLY WITH LABOR, A 30 TO 30 TIE WILL STILL MEAN A DEFEAT FOR GOVERNMENT LEGISLATIVE PROPOSALS, UNDER SECTION 23 OF THE CONSTITUTION. THUS FAR, THERE IS EVERY INDICATION THAT THE OPPOSITION WILL OPPOSE THE SIX BILLS THAT MAY LEAD TO A JOINT SITTING (THREE ELECTORAL BILLS, TWO HEALTH BILLS, AND THE BILL ESTABLISHING THE PETROLEUM AND MINERALS AUTHORITY). PRESENT ASSUMPTION IS THAT THE JOINT SITTING OF BOTH HOUSES COULD TAKE PLACE TOWARDS THE END OF JULY, ALTHOUGH A VIABLE PROCEDURE FOR THIS SO-FAR UNTRIED METHOD OF PASSING LEGISLATION UNDER SECTION 57 OF THE CONSTITUTION HAS YET TO BE DEVELOPED AND ACCEPTED. EVEN IF THE ABOVE SIX BILLS PASS A JOINT SITTING, APPROPRIATIONS OR OTHER ENABLING LEGISLATION WILL BE NEEDED TO ENACT THEM FULLY, REQUIRING PASSAGE THROUGH SENATE.

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9. PARTY LINES SEEM TO BE HARDENING IN SENATE, THOUGH WE HAVE HEARD NUMBER OF LIBERAL AND COUNTRY SENATORS SAY THEY WILL BE OPPOSED TO FORCING NEW ELECTIONS UNLESS 1) MAJOR ISSUE IS INVOLVED AND 2) THERE IS REASONABLE PROSPECT THAT OPPOSITION WILL WIN.

10. THIS PROMISES TO BE A LIVELY PARLIAMENTARY SESSION, THOUGH ON PRESENT INDICATIONS THE FOCUS IS LIKELY TO BE ON DOMESTIC AND ECONOMIC ISSUES.
GREEN

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